

## Maria E. Cantwell

1958–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE, 1993–1995

UNITED STATES SENATOR, 2001–

DEMOCRAT FROM WASHINGTON



Image courtesy of the Member

**MARIA CANTWELL HAS SERVED WASHINGTON STATE** in both chambers of the U.S. Congress. In 1992, she won a House term during the “Year of the Woman” and, in 2000, was elected to the U.S. Senate when she unseated a three-term incumbent. A former high-tech company executive and state legislator, Senator Cantwell has focused on issues important to the Washington economy—aerospace, software, biotechnology, and agriculture.

Maria Cantwell was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on October 13, 1958, the second of five children raised by Paul Cantwell, a city councilman and state legislator, and Rose Cantwell. She earned a B.A. in public administration from Miami University of Ohio in 1981, becoming the first in her family to receive a college degree.<sup>1</sup> In 1983, she moved to Washington state to direct Alan Cranston’s presidential campaign in the northwest U.S. She also worked in public relations and, later, opened her own consulting company. At age 28, Maria Cantwell was elected to the Washington legislature, and she served as a representative from 1987 to 1993. She chaired the trade and economic development committee, working to draw biotech companies to Washington. Former state house speaker Joe King recalled Cantwell as “the best legislator I ever served with.”<sup>2</sup>

When suburban Seattle Republican Representative John Miller announced his retirement in 1992, Cantwell declared her candidacy by invoking President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural call to service.<sup>3</sup> The district—which included the northern suburbs of Seattle in King and Snohomish counties and extended across Puget Sound to take in Bainbridge Island and parts of Kitsap County north of Bremerton—was affluent and politically moderate.<sup>4</sup> Describing herself as a “pro-business Democrat,” Cantwell ran on a platform that called for universal access to health care, proposed a 5 percent cut in federal discretionary spending, supported the presidential line-item veto, and backed the Brady Handgun Bill, which created a waiting period before buying a gun.<sup>5</sup> With 55 percent of the vote, Cantwell defeated a Republican state senator; it was the first time in more than 40 years that a Democrat won the district.

When Cantwell took her seat in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she received assignments on three committees: Foreign Affairs, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and Public Works and Transportation. She specialized in high-technology issues.<sup>6</sup> In August 1994, Congresswoman Cantwell introduced the Electronic Freedom of Information Act, which built on the original FOIA bill to make government more accountable for storing digital information.<sup>7</sup> On trade issues, she supported the North American Free Trade Agreement. Cantwell also voted for the landmark Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 and earned a reputation as an environmental advocate.

Cantwell left public office in 1995, after losing re-election during the “Republican Revolution” of 1994. For five years, she worked as a marketing executive for a growing Internet software company in Washington. She eventually served as the company’s vice president of consumer products as it expanded by about 1,000 jobs.

In 2000, Cantwell challenged three-term incumbent Republican Senator Slade Gorton of Washington. In a narrow race not decided until after a December recount, Cantwell prevailed by a margin of 2,229 votes (one-tenth of one percent of all the votes cast). Hers was the last Senate seat still contested, and her win evenly split the chamber 50–50.<sup>8</sup> Upon taking office in the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Cantwell pledged to follow in the footsteps of the legendary Washington Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson.<sup>9</sup> She received assignments on four committees: Energy and Natural Resources, Judiciary, Small Business, and Indian Affairs. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Cantwell left her Judiciary assignment to serve on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.

One of the first issues that Senator Cantwell took up in the Senate was campaign finance reform. “Until we craft a campaign system with a shorter, more intensive campaign period, funded with finite and equal resources available to candidates, we will not govern well,” Cantwell said.<sup>10</sup> She supported the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, which became law in 2002. Cantwell’s legislative priorities have centered on agricultural trade, high-technology business, and the environment. She has sought to open foreign markets to Washington’s diverse agricultural products. She also has been a Senate leader in prohibiting energy price manipulations and empowering law officers and consumers against identity theft crimes. Senator Cantwell also wrote legislation to create the largest expansion of Mt. Rainier National Park in 70 years, passed a bill to establish the Lewis & Clark National Historic Park, and pushed for the creation of the Wild Sky Wilderness Act and has defended key provisions in the Marine Mammals Protection Act.<sup>11</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Maria Cantwell,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 1062; *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 1598–1599; Richard Jerome, Macon Morehouse, Mary Boone, “Up in a Down Market: Dot-com Dollars Depleted, Maria Cantwell Focuses on Her New Life in the Senate,” 21 May 2001, *People*: 179.
- <sup>2</sup> “Official Biography of Maria Cantwell,” <http://cantwell.senate.gov/about/index.html> (accessed 14 December 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Marla Williams, “State Legislator Cantwell to Run for Miller’s Seat,” 11 February 1992, *Seattle Times*: D2.
- <sup>4</sup> *Politics in America*, 1994 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 1611–1612.
- <sup>5</sup> Susan Gilmore, “Cantwell May Shatter Tradition in 1st District,” 31 October 1992, *Seattle Times*: A12; Williams, “State Legislator Cantwell to Run for Miller’s Seat.”
- <sup>6</sup> *Politics in America*, 1996 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995): 1398–1399.
- <sup>7</sup> *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (8 August 1994): 1676.
- <sup>8</sup> Ben White, “A Flush Candidate’s Debt Worries; Sen. Cantwell Owes \$3 Million, and Her Portfolio Is in the Tank,” 15 March 2001, *Washington Post*: A12; for more on what companies each candidate “represented,” see Chris Taylor, “One More Digital Divide; A Tech Millionaire Takes on ‘Senator Microsoft,’” 30 October 2000, *Time*: 42.
- <sup>9</sup> *Congressional Record*, Senate, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (3 January 2001): 11.
- <sup>10</sup> *Congressional Record*, Senate, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (27 March 2001): 2096.
- <sup>11</sup> “Official Biography of Maria Cantwell,” <http://cantwell.senate.gov/about/index.html>.